The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
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Jim Witte, Waukee, Iowa
Mike Hicklin
Iowa Department for the Blind, Des Moines, Iowa
Second Interview
5-6-11

Mike Hicklin: Let me read some stuff here first. Today we're doing a part 2 interview with Jim Witte from 200 Parkview Drive, Waukee, Iowa. The location of this

interview is the Department for the Blind. It's May 6. It's about 1:45 pm. My name is Mike Hicklin. Jim and I have known one another for a number of years working here together and both are retired. This interview is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Jim is it, do I have your consent to record this?

Jim Witte: Yes.

Hicklin: Let's go ahead and start.

Witte: All right. Well, one of the ways to look at the different philosophies of blindness would be to recognize that Iowa, indeed, was the place that epitomizes, or epitomized, the development of both of the philosophies of blindness. We tend to say that the basic philosophy of blindness that was the biggest handicap, the biggest problem in dealing with blindness, was the centuries old custodial approach that looked upon blind persons as being helpless, hapless and hopeless. And so, Rehab. programs and Occupational programs for the blind started out with very low expectations. And so, you had very few blind people in the mainstream of society, and many people working in sheltered work shops, and so on. That, in a nut shell, is the essence of the custodial approach to services for the blind.

I say that Iowa in some respect epitomized that kind of philosophy, when you look at the first 30 some years of the Commission for the Blind, and the fact that very, very few blind persons received anything other than custodial type services. A factor that epitomizes that though; the fact that

Iowa was, in some respects, well recognized in the field of work with the blind in that negative philosophical approach, [is evidenced by two organizations—there were more than two] is that there are two organizations. I think to this day the American Foundation for the Blind and the American Association of Workers for the Blind, which became national organizations; both of them have their birth in the state of Iowa.

(End of Recording 1)
3:24

(Beginning of Recording 2)

Witte: I can't remember the year, but it could be found in the old minutes of the Commission, I think, held at Vinton [I think a meeting was held at Vinton], which was the location of the school for the blind. And, it was a meeting of workers, teachers and professional workers in the field of work with the blind. Out of that meeting in Vinton came a suggestion that what the field of blindness really needed was a central kind of unifying force; which would be a place where discussions could be held, or experiments could be made, or research could take place regarding work with the blind. And, that you'd have this kind of a central source of information, regarding that, and aids and appliances, and so on. And, that led to the formation of what is known as the American Foundation for the Blind, which has, for a long time, been, or was, for a long time, the major spokesperson in effect involved with the field of work with the blind.

And so, there are two things that somebody would need to look up; one is the year, and the other is that, I'm pretty

sure it was a meeting of the American Association of Workers with the Blind or for the Blind. But, again, the fact that it was held in Vinton is notable, and the fact that out of that meeting came the birth of the American Foundation for the Blind is a matter of considerable consequence. That it occurred in Iowa is certainly worth noting.

So, we say here briefly that the American Foundation for the Blind was meant to be an organization made up primarily of professionals in the field of work with the blind. And so, you would have superintendents of schools for the blind and whatever other kind of service providers there were throughout the country; that was the intention. What happened is a little bit different, considerably different from that.

An organization like that needed some funding. There was no easy place to find funding. A route that appears to have been taken is that organizers of the American Foundation for the Blind began to name board members who were people of some prominence and some financial background. So, you had doctors and lawyers and other people of some stature in the United States who began to serve as the board. They were not necessarily the spokespersons for, or knew very much about, blindness. They always hired, from the very beginning, an executive secretary who was a blind person and would have been a person of some stature.

Under the American Foundation for the Blind, there were some good things that happened. For instance, the whole concept of the talking-book machine and library service came out of the American Foundation for the Blind, which was an excellent thing. But, as far as developing a different philosophy, that did not occur. So, whatever the

American Foundation for the Blind did that was good to some people, it appeared to just be a continuation of the old custodial approach. But, anyway, it had its beginning in Iowa. Now, in Iowa, of course, for its first 30 years, the agency for the blind in the state of Iowa was unquestionably a very custodial type agency.

Okay, the second philosophy then, which has had a struggle but has become much more wide spread, was the philosophy developed by, basically, by the leaders of the National Federation of the Blind. And, this was a group of blind people speaking for themselves who developed the, just the one-hundred and whatever it is, one-hundred-eighty degrees turn from the first philosophy to a philosophy that was very, very positive. And, began to say things, like, the average blind person could do the average job in the average place of business. And, that blindness, instead of being that very terrible defect that condemned people basically to a life of helplessness, was instead a characteristic that could be worked on. And, that people could lead full lives and be first-class citizens in society.

That had its birth, to some extent, in California. But, the first program where the theory that the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business, if he has training and opportunity. And, that blind persons can engage in almost any activity they wish. That was first put to the test very much in the state of Iowa. So, there was a revolution that occurred, beginning in 1958, in the state of Iowa. And, there were many first occurrences with that new program in the state of Iowa. We had an Orientation Center that talked a whole lot about changing attitudes, as well as learning skills and techniques of blindness, and encouraging people to go in the fields that

they wish to go into; whether it was law or medicine, or mechanical engineering, or auto mechanics, or whatever it might be. Whatever they were interested in. This was an agency that said, "Go for it," in effect.

And, as a result of that, the working of that program, it had many, many firsts kind of occurring [successes] in the state of Iowa; big breakthroughs in blind persons teaching In the schools, and breakthroughs in fields of law, farming, salesmanship, whatever it might be. A lot of people, more and more blind guys, were going to college and entering into different fields and succeeding. So, that was the proof of the pudding that that approach did work.

Now, it's also fair to recognize that not all blind people jumped up and down with joy that this great program was happening in Iowa. There were a fair number of blind Iowans who objected to that, who were basically brought up under the old system, and they didn't really think…Well, I think there were two things that occurred. Some of them didn't think that it was really true that the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business. That was too much for them to buy. Or that blindness, instead of being thought of as this great handicap, could be reduced to the level of the characteristic with nuisance value and may not be as important as some of the other characteristics that individuals have.

Hicklin: Wasn't it true that most blind folks really were not employed much more than, like, a home cottage kind of industry, at best, or doing popcorn sales, or little jobs like that, or weaving or caning chairs. There just wasn't…We just didn't see blind guys out in competitive employment, of much of any sort, be it the skilled or even unskilled.

Witte: You know, Mike, that's very, very true and it can't be emphasized too much that many of the blind people out there going to school, or people who became blind as adults were aware of the fact that most blind people were not in the mainstream. And so, their expectations for themselves, you know, would be very, very low. I'll tell you one story that illustrates this quite a bit.

The Orientation Center had been going on for, in Iowa, now, the new type of Orientation Center for three or four years. And, a fair number of students were going to college, you know, deciding to be something; school teachers or something else, lawyers, whatever it might be. And, there were other people that refused to even think of doing that, because that was beyond their expectations. And, historically, what you say is very true. That, historically, when you look at the blind population, the vast majority of them were either employed in sheltered workshops, or in some kind of Home Industries programs. Reflected by the fact that here in the 1950's, when this great shakeup is occurring in Iowa, the schools for the blind across the country were teaching what, they were teaching chair caning, weaving, sewing, some emphasis on dark room technicians. That was a possibility. That seemed to fit for a blind guy; dark room technicians or piano tuning. And, there's nothing wrong with any of those things. But, basically, that's what they were offering you; a half a dozen stereotyped occupations.

And so, let me tell you a story, I remember this very well. [About the third or fourth year of the orientation centers program bind in operation, we had graduates who had gone on with their lives.] About the third or fourth year

we were in business, in the Orientation Center, and some people had gone through the Center and had gone on. They were graduates of the school for the blind, which is in some respects an irrelevancy. But, they had gone on to expect more things for themselves. We had this one student, who was as bright as the next guy, and some of his colleagues were going to college, but he said, "No." And, I left this out of the other list, but massage work was the big thing. You could hardly find a YMCA that didn't have a blind guy giving massages. So, it was one of the stereotypical jobs; nothing wrong with being a masseur, but anyway. So, this guy said that he wanted to be a masseur; that was on the list of possibilities. So, he goes through training. Commission helps him, in the Rehabilitation program, to get the training and helps him get a job. And, he's on the job for a short time and his hands began to break out because he was allergic to the oils and the soaps and the things, whatever you use when you give a massage. So, he was through with that field.

So, he comes back and again his counselor is saying, "You know, why don't you give some thought to going to college?" "You know, you could be all kinds of things." Well, "No," he said, "I want to be a piano tuner." And, he was determined. So, he went off to be a piano tuner, and the Commission helped him; I think it was a two year, when he came through this program. I think it was somewhere in Iowa, but I can't remember for sure. After about two years of training you were not just a piano tuner; you were a technician. You could take a piano apart or organ apart and put it back together again, and it would perform like new. So, he did that. And, he was okay with that. And, he gets a set of tools and he goes to work for one of the piano

companies in Des Moines. And, whether it's whatever, personality conflict...Well, anyway, he didn't last there very long and they let him go. So, then he said, "I'll strike out on my own." And, there were a lot of independent piano tuners. Okay, so he strikes out on his own and whatever it was, you know, it was the same that failed, too. And, he couldn't make it.

So finally, and this is three to four years later, he comes around and his counselor says, "I'm telling you, again, why aren't you going to college?" Well, I suppose nothing else seems to work. He went to college and he got a degree in Psychology. And, he spent the next 30 years being a psychological counselor in a hospital, fully self-supporting. He had a good job and a good career. What had kept him from doing that in the first place was the damn stereotypical notion of the old approach.

But, okay, that's evidence of the kind of thing that held some blind people back from going ahead; their heritage. The old heritage of work with the blind was against them. So, how does that affect the general population of blind people in the state of Iowa? And, I've made some reference to the fact that every year there was a meeting at Vinton of the organization of blind persons. It was called the Iowa Association of the Blind, and in many ways it was kind of an alumni. Most of the people who met there...And, it was held at the school for the blind in the summer, because the facility was great. And, most of the guys who went there were glad to get back home, because they'd been there for twelve years, or whatever.

15:00

Witte: Many of them had been there for twelve years, twenty years ago, so you had this older crew of people. And, they looked at…and they had not had, for instance, any opportunity to have any real travel techniques. The long cane was a product of the Second World War. And, the veterans [the blinded veterans of WWII] pushed the use of that; and that was an innovation that had great impact and made a world of difference to a lot of people. The whole concept of independent mobility was just extremely important. Well, a lot of these people never had that opportunity. And so, in some respects two things seemed to happen.

One of them, is that the older guys felt cheated. They never had had this chance, and they had spent maybe twenty years home sewing or chair caning. Nothing wrong with any of those, again, but you know they had never had the opportunity. And, the idea of really being able to get around by themselves was not good news for a lot of them. There were always some blind people who took the bull by the horns and would go wherever they wanted to, with or without a cane or dog or anything. But, they were few in number and far between. But, you had these older blind people who were stuck in the heritage of the old philosophical approach, and that was just bad news. So, then you're mingling, all of a sudden you're mingling the new graduates of the Orientation Center, or the people who are now going through the Commission's programs, whether it's the Orientation Center or Rehab., or whatever it might be. And, they're mingling with these old timers.

Hicklin: Perhaps the new, young hot shots or something?

Witte: Well, there was some of that. See, because in the process what the Orientation Center tended to do, which it needed to do, was to bring in these guys who hesitated about doing something with themselves and immersed them so much in this new philosophical approach; that when they began to recognize that they could go wherever they wanted, to whenever they wanted to, and that they could plan otherwise and they could have, and it was possible. And, that basically society was willing to cheat them every time it could, because that's what it had done for thousands of years. So, that's right; a lot of those guys, then, became kind of up in arms and said, "Hey!" And so, their reaction to the older guys was not very nice, either, which was unfortunate. But, that occurred.

And so, that, down the road, what you had was the organized blind movement; which at one time there was just the one organization, Iowa Association of the Blind, which in its early days, again, was mostly alumni association. But, as these new guys came in, and they joined that organization, they began to out number, or out talk or whatever, and so they began to kind of take over that organization, which was hurtful to some people. It hurt some of the older people. And, somewhere along the line, then, some of the older people got their backs up and said, well, the heck with this new business. And, they broke off and formed their own organization. The other, if you want to call them more progressive or whatever, group became affiliated with the National Federation of the Blind, which after all in all fairness, was the foundation for the new philosophical approach. Whether you liked the NFB or didn't like them was in some cases irrelevant. That's where these ideas came from. So, that many people who joined that

organization then were really kind of devoted converts to the cause.

And, that is a good way to put it. The cause of the blind now became something that people could talk about and do something about. The cause of the blind had always been there, except that nobody ever bothered to question the solution, which was custodial. All of a sudden you have a bunch of people, and some of them very capable, very outspoken, and people who were doing all kinds of different jobs. And, they were standing up and saying, "Hey, we need to deal with…we need to educate the public."

There's always the two-fold thing in this new philosophy of blindness. You had a two-pronged attack. One of them is that you had to educate the blind person, himself, first. And then you had to educate society at the same time. Much of the education of society had to come from the blind guys who were converts to the cause. They were the ones who would go out and give talks to the Lions Clubs or whatever. And, they would fight for their rights, rights which most of them haven't ever really realized they had, and they were being denied. You know, and there are a number of things that you could point to.

The University of Iowa, for instance, which many of the blind guys were going there because it was a good place to go to school. And, they were as good of sports fans as anybody else or whatever. But, anyway, they knew it was a good place. So, then a bunch of them are there; there's enough of them there and they decided to form their own organization. I mean, they have a student chapter because they could help each other. I mean, they were the first guys that went through, you know, had troubles to deal with. The professors didn't want them, or professors tended to ignore

them, or whatever. And, or hiring readers, and being able to control readers and whatever; to run your own affairs on the campus. The first guys who did that were, they were pioneers. Okay, but then some other people came along, so the pioneers became a resource for the new guys coming in. And so, they formed their own organization, this chapter of the students, and they affiliated with the NFB. So, then the University of Iowa offered the organizations some kind of benefits. I mean they might furnish you a meeting space; they might furnish you telephone service or a variety of things like that. Then you were recognized by the University of Iowa as an organization that had approval on the campus.

Well, for along time Iowa refused to recognize blind guys, and I think it took several years of arguing back and forth before they finally said, "Well, I guess maybe you're right." So, that's the kind of thing that was a problem. So, again, it's a deal where the agency was always supportive of the blind guys in those situations. But, it was basically much up to the blind guys themselves to push the cause. I mean, it didn't do a whole lot of good always for somebody from the Commission for the Blind, a staff person, to go down there and say to the University of Iowa, "Wait a minute." Ultimately, though, that did happen.

I'll give you another instance: the University of Iowa, no, not the University of Iowa; the University at that time. It was called Iowa State Teacher's College, way back when, and it was a teacher's college, primarily. Well, later on it became…

Hicklin: University of Northern Iowa.

Witte: The University of Northern Iowa. There was a time, and this was occurring in the early 60s, years before the university, whatever it was. Iowa State Teacher's College had not denied a blind person the right to enter college. Somewhere along the line, though, the college people realized that, well you have these blind guys going through there, but whoever heard of one getting a job teaching? See, so it was a waste of time depending on how you looked at things. And, they were right. It was a waste of time for these blind guys to go through, because nobody was going to hire them as a teacher, when that field was closed at that point basically.

Hicklin: A quick question. You remember a story that there was something in Iowa, a law at the time, that if you were a teacher you had to be a certified swimmer because some child somewhere in Iowa had drowned while at a school activity and the teacher hadn't saved them. And, anyway, so there was a law passed saying that to be a certified teacher you had to be a certified swimmer, and that blind people obviously couldn't become a certified swimmer, because you wouldn't know where the person was drowning.

Witte: I hadn't heard that, Mike, but it sounds like a possibility. You see, again, it is a misconception there, but maybe that's one of the reasons why the Orientation Center insisted on [encouraged] people learning how to water ski. Anyway, we did.

So, to go back to the Iowa State Teacher's College. They were refusing blind guys to come, saying, "Well, what's the point?" That was their policy. Well, there were no laws, you know, prohibiting them from doing that. At that time, I

remember, the Director of Field Operations was a man named John Taylor; a blind guy who had gone to college in Tennessee, and had been once upon a time a shop teacher. Anyway, so he was in a position to go to the college people at Cedar Falls and say to them, "There's a new day dawning here folks and we have this program and there are people teaching all over the country. So, for you to do what you're doing is unreasonable." And, they dropped it then. So, then they would accept blind guys. But, the story, the thing that will indicate how deeply imbedded…I mean they might accept them but they didn't really think…Anyway, they saw that it was not valid for them to turn these guys down.

We'll take another case with the University of Iowa, where one of the students from early years in the Orientation Center back in the '60s somewhere, went to the University of Iowa, fully intending to be an elementary school teacher. So, it was a young lady who was totally blind. She goes through, like, the first three years of the program for Elementary Ed. at the University of Iowa. And, she's doing fine in the program, and very capable. Comes to the time in the semester where; there is a semester where you have to practice teach. The University of Iowa said to her, "Tough, we are not going to recommend you for practice teaching. We will not be responsible for a blind person taking care of a classroom of elementary kids. So, you can't practice teach; we won't supervise you. We won't locate a school." They would not. So, the Commission and a Counselor basically said to the University of Iowa, "Well, okay. What if she locates a place where she can practice teach on her own? Are you going to recognize that?" "Well, I suppose." So, there was a lady teaching in Cedar Rapids whose husband was a blind guy, who was also an electrical

engineer, and she knew a lot about blindness. And, she said, "Bring her on. I'll be her supervising teacher." And so, that's how that happened. She went to Cedar Falls, and or Cedar Rapids I think it was, and taught in an elementary class room under the supervision of this lady, and the University of Iowa recognized that then. And so, she was certified to teach, no thanks to the University of Iowa. But, thanks to, you know, some blind guys hanging in there and saying, "Now wait a minute." Well, that was, you know, that was the first that solved that problem. The next blind person that went to Iowa who wanted to get an elementary…or to practice teach, they had it on record that somebody had done it, and so no more; but anyway.

So, those were the kinds of things that were, you know, they were so imbedded in our society, in our culture's way of thinking about blindness, that it was just very, very difficult to overcome. Because after all, common sense would tell you how is a blind school teacher going to know what's going on with those kids? Well, obviously blind persons can and did; and so it became less and less of a problem. The next problem came with getting a school district to say okay, we'll hire a blind teacher. You might get through the University of Iowa, you might resolve that problem, but the next problem down the road, is whose going to give her a job. So, that would take some more arm-twisting and some more conversation on the part of the blind person, and on the part of the agency to go to bat for that person.

30:00

Witte: So, how do you educate, I mean, the education process, again, had to be a two-pronged approach. It had to

be to the blind person to really, to get that person to believe, I can do it; I can be a teacher. And, then you had to educate the public to say, well, okay we'll accept that; we'll go with that. And, an illustration of how that second part, you know, I'm sure there were all kinds of different ways of getting school boards or school administrators to listen to reason.

The story that I know happened pretty well was that the Director of the Commission for the Blind, Kenneth Jernigan, was a very effective speaker. He was giving a talk to a large group of Lions Club members and he was talking about the problems, and he talked about this particular problem and how difficult it was to get schools to open their arms and say okay. And so, in the audience was one of the administrators from that school district, who came to them afterwards and said, "You convinced me."

Hicklin: And, that resulted in a teaching job.

Witte: So, that teaching job; but then that opened the door, you know, something as simple…I don't know it seemed to me to be simple, as switchboard operation.

One of our first students who came in the fall of '59 and was here for several months. And, the Commission for the blind had a relatively small switchboard so she practiced on that. And, she became our switchboard operator for the Commission. Well, you know, they knew there were jobs like that at Ma Bell. So, anyway she applied and Ma Bell, you know, "What do you mean, how can you do that?" And, they weren't particularly interested. So, I think that she kept knocking on their door, and the Counselor from the Commission kept knocking on the door saying, "Well, give her an opportunity anyway. You should give her a trial."

And, finally they did, and that went on for over a year. She was back and forth with Ma Bell, and then they finally said, "Okay we gave her a trial and it worked out." And, she became a charge operator, and that was, you know, her full time job. So, it's amazing sometimes how much effect one breakthrough can have.

Because about two years later, there was another young lady who had been blinded in a car accident; totally blind. And, when she got to know this first lady, who became the switchboard operator at North Western Bell; got to know her somehow or another and thought, "Well, that would be a good place for me to work." And so, when she was ready to leave the Center, she said that she was going to go over to North Western Bell and apply for a job. And, I said, "Well, I wish you well, but it took Karen about two years to get that job done." So, she comes back that same day and said, "Well, I don't know what you're talking about. I went over there, and I applied for a job and they set me up to take a physical next week. If I pass the physical, I'm on the job." So, it was like the difference between night and day. But, it took that one gal a long time, and again, some persuasion from the agency. And so, that happened all the way down the line.

Hicklin: And, that first blind person had to be extremely accessible [successful], otherwise the door would have been closed.

Witte: I think so, yeah. That was always the risk, you know, when you talk to; the Counselors face that risk that sometimes you'd place somebody and it wouldn't work out. That would tend to close that door, you're right. But, there

were more doors opened than closed. So, it was a long process, and I'm sure it continues, you know, we're talking 50 years later. I'm sure that the same kinds of things are still out there. Blind persons are a relatively small minority. We have centuries of mistaken notions about blindness, and it just continues to be a problem.

(End of Recording 2)
35:08

(Beginning of Recording 3)

Witte: Let me say apropos of the difference in philosophical approach, how it had some practical application in this state. The school for the blind tended to be more of the old school, and it was not particularly, did not look favorably upon the programs of the Iowa Commission for the Blind. There are probably a variety of reasons why that's the case, but time would not allow us to go into all of them. In any case, it reached the point where the school for the blind appeared to be making some effort to keep their graduates from coming to the Commission for the Blind program, particularly the Orientation Center. And, they weren't making much use of our library service. Obviously there was just a tension between the two agencies. At that point, the Director of the Commission for the Blind decided that it would be much better to have a unified approach to the problems of blindness, and that the two agencies being the school for the blind and the Commission for the Blind could certainly work on the same approach. It would be better for everybody concerned. That would require legislative action.

And so, he made the effort in the legislature to remove the school for the blind from the jurisdiction of the Board of Regents and to put it under the jurisdiction of the Commission for the Blind. It was a fairly bloody war, in effect. And, you know, the split in the blindness movement took sides. Obviously, the blind persons who were not very favorable to the Commission stood up and said in effect, "Oh no, leave the school where it is." And so, there was the struggle; was pretty strong and caused a fair amount of ill feelings. And, at some point, why, the Director of the Commission for the Blind decided to drop the issue because the chances of succeeding were not great, or that there would be such ill feelings that it didn't happen.

Now, jumping to a different thing; we're still talking about the two philosophies of blindness. On the national level the American Foundation for the Blind, which had been born in Iowa, was not particularly fond of the Commission for the Blind, either. And, the Commission for the Blind was not particularly fond of the approach, the thinking that the American Foundation for the Blind was still bogged down in the old custodial approach; and that was not good. The American Foundation for the Blind was pretty potent, was well financed, and it was a pretty potent organization. And, again, it did some good things. I mean, there were some developments of products and aids and appliances that were good.

So, what it began to do, then, the American Foundation for the Blind, began to develop a program which harked back to some extent to its original purpose for coming into existence. And, that was to have kind of, a standardized approach to the field of work with the blind; and so that you would have standards, in effect. And, the American

Foundation for the Blind created ten or twelve committees. And, you're going to have to look up the exact number, but I think there were like twelve committees. There would be a committee on Library service, a committee on Orientation Centers, a committee on Mobility by itself, and God only knows what else, a committee on Vending.

Anyway, there were ten or twelve areas of service to the blind. And, they wrote standards, the theory being that they would bring in experts in each field; form a committee of people who taught Mobility for instance, Cane Travel or whatever, and they would write these standards. And, you'd bring in a committee of people who provided Library service, and they would write standards for the Library. And, that was supposedly a very democratic process. These committees met, and they formed standards, and then they published the standards. And, that was supposed to be. Then they would be circulated throughout the field for work with the blind, so that this agency and all the other agencies would get a copy of the standards and would either accept them or not accept them; agree or not agree.

Well, it became fairly evident that…there were two things that became very evident. One of the primary things that was happening is that there were hardly any people on the committees who were of the new school of the, say, progressive philosophy of blindness; not a good terminology, but of the new approach to blindness, new philosophy. There were hardly any of them on the committees, so they didn't have much input. The NFB, which basically was the source of the spoken word or the written word for the new philosophy of blindness said, "Wait a minute, you can't do that." And, they began to argue. But across the country

most agencies for the blind were still of the...And, most schools for the blind were still of the old approach, right?

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: So, that was very clear [when] they published these standards. And, the approach to them was...This was kind of hard to follow to some extent. The American Foundation for the Blind funded this approach. They set up the committees, and they published the standards called the Commission on Standards and Accreditation. The theory being that if the field of work with the blind would accept these standards, then there would be accountability. They could come to this agency and say, "Are you meeting these standards for Library service?" "If you aren't, we won't accredit you, or we'll give you time to accredit." Plus, you were going to have to pay to be in the ball game. It was the old argument for, you know, a lot of things have standards, and accreditation. So, they were going to promote this thing for the field of work with the blind, which on the surface was a good idea. You know, if you have a good program going some place, why then, you know, somebody sets high standards and everybody should try to follow that; as is done with schools and medicine and whatever else.

Hicklin: Certainly.

Witte: But, it became fairly obvious, particularly in the Iowa Commission for the Blind administration, that these standards weren't good. And, in many cases they weren't as far reaching as what we were already doing. And secondly, they tended to be burdened too much with, for lack of a

better word, over professionalism. So that, for instance, to be a Travel teacher, or mobility, and they used the term Orientation and Mobility; a minor matter. We always called it Travel; travel getting about by yourself. But, Orientation and Mobility is a much better, scientifically sounding, term. But, you'd have to have a Master's Degree. So, what goes into a Master's degree to teach somebody how to use it?

And the Library service, the Commission's Library service, was far beyond what they were recommending in almost all of the things. If you read it reasonably carefully, you would discover that there was a fair amount of the old custodialism involved. I'll give you one example; all Orientation and Mobility instruction will be given one on one, and the instructor will always be present. Everybody says, well, that seems like a good idea, except that you raise the question, well, how's the guy supposed to be independent, if he knows there's somebody 20 feet away all the time?

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: It's that obvious. So, I mean they weren't...anyway. So the NFB, on a national level, began to fight the standards. Again, two reasons; one being that the standards were improper in some respects and they were certainly not forward looking at all. And secondly, you'd have a body created that would have absolute power. In order to be accredited, you know, somebody would have to agree to accredit you. That body has so much power. And, you're looking down the road ultimately to the point if you're not accredited, then you're not going to get funded.

Hicklin: And, there was a problem that the newer more progressive folks weren't being represented in those boards and in those standards.

Witte: Right. So, The Braille Monitor, the NFB published a whole series of articles pointing out what were the errors in the way. And, the COMSTAC people, apparently most agencies and most schools accepted the notion of the standards. And so, then the COMSTAC people, or the AFB at that point, would appoint a board called the National Accrediting Committee or Commission, one of the two. And, then AFB said, "We're out of the picture;" then, "We're not part of that; we're appointing this independent," right. Well, I mean, how independent could you be. The money came from AFB, first of all, to set up the committees, and they appointed the committees.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: And, then they appoint, they get the committee standards accepted, and then they appoint the NAC, the National Accrediting Committee. And, then they say, "But, we're out of it." Well, they were in it all the way. And, one of the shrewd maneuvers that they made may have been shrewd, or not. I can't remember the board, how big the board was, the NAC. It was a fairly good size commission board. They appointed Kenneth Jernigan to be on that board. You know, and so if you would look at some of the, some of the NAC meetings sometimes when they voted if there were 30 members it would be 29 to 1 time after time. Jernigan was opposing, and trying to get them to change their ways. And, I think that ultimately the NFB made

enough noise that the American Foundation was never able, or NAC, was never able to become self-sufficient. You had to pay. If you were going to be accredited you had to pay money into it. Well, the Commission wouldn't have joined, and most of the schools for the blind in the country did join. And, a fair number of agencies did join; but then, you know, the NFB kind of kept pecking away at it, and they would talk some states into pulling out.

And so, the standards never really got the influence that they had hoped. That tended to, again, to acerbate the difference of opinion. You know, I mean, there were people who believed the AFB's approach was absolutely right, and that the NFB's approach was not right, and it was not professional, and so on. Anyway, at this time I think, or for many years now, I think a fair number of people have realized that it was beneficial that the NFB, for the whole field of work with the blind, that the NFB held its ground long enough so that NAC couldn't really enforce its standards.

Hicklin: Didn't the AFB write a history and call it something like, "Ten Days in May," or something similar to that, that was down in your office, down on first floor? I think we have an AFB history document of some kind that would be something that could be tapped into for dates and.

Witte: Yeah, and I don't know whether that dealt with NAC at all. I think it dealt with the…

Hicklin: Certainly the early days of the AFB.

Witte: And, a big thing, of course, about the AFB was that they became kind of the sponsor of Helen Keller. And, Helen Keller got all kinds of publicity, you know. The Helen Keller story is a great story, but the AFB tended to use her for fund raising.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: Which, was not necessarily good. I can't remember the book you're talking about. [Actually, the book that is being discussed can be found at the Iowa Department for the Blind. The author is a book by Koestler, and it looks at the history of work with the blind.]

15:00

Witte: But, there is a book that basically is a history of…and I think in that book you would find the deal about the American Association of Workers for the blind and the meeting at Vinton could well be in the book.

Hicklin: I think its still in a book case down in Sandy Tigges' office.

Witte: Yeah, probably it is; right. Yeah, that will flush it out some.

Hicklin: If someone was so inclined they could dig for more material. (Laughter)

Witte: Yeah, that's right; easily. I think that one of the problems with getting…I mean, the Iowa Commission for the

Blind's story is a good story, and you'd think that everybody in the world would accept it, that this approach worked. But, agencies were not, most agencies weren't all that anxious to accept it, because it wasn't. I don't know really why.

Well, it's like this. If you were a, you know, you move into a farm community and these guys have been farming the same way for 40 years. And, you come along and say, "I got a better way of doing that." They're not going to be too anxious to take it. So you know, I think that this was such an abrupt departure for people that worked with the blind, this philosophy. Development of this philosophy was such an abrupt departure that a lot of people just simply had to shake their head. And, you could understand why. They said, "Oh wait a minute here. We've had this working for a thousand years, and you're coming around and telling us now, what do you mean blindness is a characteristic nuisance value? Don't tell us that."

You know, so, but gradually, you know, as the years have gone by, and there have been more and more states that have gone quite a bit...I mean, they've sent people to the Commission for the Blind, as you know. And, staff members, they come here and they take some training, and then they go back. And, then the NFB has developed, or helped fund four or five training centers, orientation centers, in the country. So that approach has you know, has spread some; which makes things better for everybody concerned. And, I guess, the laws to some extent you know, the accessibility business so that you can't, you know, you can't, what do I want to say, discriminate against the blind guy unless you got a pretty good reason to do it. You can say, "You can't do..." What Iowa used to do, or UNI used to

do, or whatever. You can't, the law is against that; and some say that's good. There are others who say, "Well, yeah, you know, it's a good thing." However, some of the real progress was made when you had to fight for it.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: And, the blind guys in the organizations fought for it.

Hicklin: And, while attitudes may well be more positive now, and times better, when you look at how difficult it is for a blind guy or gal to get out and actually find employment, there's still tremendous discrimination. It's really tough to get an initial chance to show your stuff.

Witte: Yeah, discrimination is very real.

Hicklin: So, the battle goes on.

Witte: The battle goes on; and Lord only knows how long it will take to. But, again, I think one of the problems being that blind persons constitute a very small minority. And so, there's not that much evidence, I mean. So, to this day I can…You know, a few years ago I remember a blind student saying that she was discriminated by a university, which shall remain nameless, because she had applied for an internship, I think of some sort, or a special course; and had every reason to believe that she would get it because her grades were just excellent. And, it was a field that she liked, and she had a couple professors that she liked. So, then she was turned down, and one of the people who turned her down was one of the professors that she thought

was on her side. And, he made the mistake of writing a letter to the head of the Department, saying that, if I can remember those words exactly, "It is true that I gave this student an A in this course but it was a…" I can't remember the words; fails me at the moment. But, basically what he was saying, it was done out of kindness. She didn't deserve it, "But, because of her condition I gave her an "A" out of kindness." Well, that's the worst kind of discrimination.

Hicklin: Certainly.

Witte: He couldn't have been too bright to write that letter either, but he did and he got by with it. So, I don't know.

(End of Recording 3)
21:19

(Beginning of Recording 4)

Witte: This may fit into the story somewhere. We talked about discrimination, and we talked about blind persons getting together and believing they have a cause, and fighting for that cause and getting something done.

An instance in Iowa, in the Commission for the Blind history, though, was not done by the Commission for the Blind. It has to do with an outfit called the Blind of Iowa Credit Union way back in the dark ages; way back in the early 60s. For instance, one of the things that happened with more blind people getting jobs and having better income, some people were interested in buying life insurance right. And, it was impossible to get an insurance

company to write you insurance on a standard rate. I can remember…

Hicklin: Simply because you were blind, right?

Witte: Yeah, and you know John Taylor was a blind guy, and myself, we were talking to the same insurance agent. And so, we both bought life insurance policies. And, Taylor knew…The insurance agent told him that there's two things about…Basically, we have the same policy. Let's say we were buying a $5,000 life insurance policy, probably all I could afford back in those days. And, my policy had double indemnity in case I got killed in an accident, and standard rate. Okay, John Taylor was at least as healthy as I am, maybe healthier; I don't know. [He had to pay an extra premium.] But, he cannot get double indemnity, he has to be a premium, I mean, extra premium. So, we used to come to work together, we'd laugh about that some on the way. But, you know, it was obviously an irritation. And, anybody who would look at the both of us would say, "Well, why?" you know. Well, but then common sense tells you that what the insurance company says…and this was a good insurance company; I still have the policy. And Taylor, probably…Taylor's widow probably collected on his.

But anyway, you know, there just wasn't much you could do about it. Common sense, as the insurance agency would say, the insurance company would say common sense would tell you that a blind guy is more subject to accidental death than a sighted guy. I mean, you get run over and fall down stairs. I mean, there's no, there was no actuarial evidence. The big thing that the blind guys got angry about was, where in the hell was the actuarial evidence? There

wasn't any actuarial; but so, anyway. It was just one of those, common sense will tell you that right; so okay.

So anyway, the insurance fight was taken up here in Iowa again. And, there were some blind guys who got tired of listening to that crap. And so, they started talking to insurance commissioners across the country, and particularly in Iowa. And, I think they finally got it changed. Took a long time, but the insurance commissioners who would listen to them say, "Well, that's right, you know, unless you have actuarial evidence." So, they began to get some changes made. On the other hand, they could, I think, turn you down all together, period. If you wanted to buy life insurance, well, credit unions in those days, small credit unions particularly, had this great life insurance deal that you could, up to $2,000, you could get dollar for dollar insurance; life insurance, plain life insurance.

Hicklin: Was that at some cost or was that free?

Witte: No, it was free. It was free to the member. So, you put $2,000 into your account, savings account, at the credit union, and you have $2,000 worth of life insurance. Now, the credit union has to pay a premium, but because it's a group. It's pretty cheap. It was still pretty cheap insurance, right?

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: So, it was a good deal. So, there were blind guys saying, well, nothing else. And, there were some blind guys who could not get insurance because of whatever the physical cause of blindness was; may have been a medical

cause that the insurance company could say, "No. Nobody in their right mind would insure you." So anyway, that was a possibility.

And, the other thing was that in those days it was very difficult for a blind person to walk into a bank and get a small loan. Again, the same kind of discrimination occurred. "Why would we lend? You don't even have a job, you know, why would we lend you any?" So…But, if you have a credit union, you know; and it's like a cooperative. And, you're putting your money in there, and your colleagues are putting their money in there, and you can get small loans; and you get this…Got together and decided to form a credit union, the IAB Credit Union. And, this was back in the late 60s. Somewhere in there these guys got together and they went to the Credit Union League, I suppose, and found out what you had to do to ask to form a credit union. And, in those days the credit unions were under the Banking Department of the state of Iowa. Nowadays, there's a separate credit union department and a separate banking department. But, in those days they were all under the Banking Department.

So, they went there and they found out what they had to do. And, they formed this corporation or credit union. And, they were going to…And, they had to get permission and be authorized by the Credit Union Department or the Banking Department; and the Banking Department turned them down. I mean, these were ten people who were, you know, they were capable of putting in a couple thousand dollars or a thousand dollars or something. So, and they were capable. The argument that the Banking Department was that they didn't think a blind organization could run a financial institution, and so they were rejected.

The story is that once they were rejected they went to Kenneth Jernigan either in his position as Director of the Commission or, I don't know, whether he was something in the NFB at that time, who went to bat for them. He said, "This is out and out discrimination." And, he carried the day somehow or other. The Banking Department then said, "Oh well, okay we see the light of day now; we approve it." So, it was developed and it functioned for over 20 years. And so, you know, it had never really a big membership. There were four or five hundred people, I suppose, and some got small loans, and some defaulted, and some didn't. And, the credit union somehow or another, by and large, usually made some money. And so, it was able to pay the insurance. Because it had to pay the insurance premium to the insuring company, which was part of the credit union organization, I think. And, it wasn't a great big premium so that, you know, you could keep your insurance and some of those guys kept $22,000 [Correction: $2,000] in there forever, for the life insurance purpose.

And, the board was usually made up of blind persons, you know. And, you could hire a book keeper. I wound up being the manager of it for a while, but it was, you know, it functioned it was accepted in the credit union family and ultimately, because it didn't grow big enough; but after 20 some years it basically had fulfilled its purpose anyway. By that time blind guys…It was easier to get loans and it was easier to buy life insurance. By that time they had done away with the extra premium and all that kind of stuff.

But it took, you know, it took years of arguing. A guy that knows the answer to the argument, I think, is Jim Omvig because I think as a lawyer he was…He took up that case. Anyway, so then ultimately, of course, that credit

union was absorbed or joined with the state employees' credit union. And, then any blind person in the state of Iowa who wanted to could join that credit union.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: And, basically you could join any credit union anyway. So, there was no need any longer for a separate credit union for the blind.

Hicklin: Did there get to be a substantial fight over who, which organization owned the credit union when it was here?

Witte: Yeah, there was a misunderstanding over that, and it had to do with the name. It was called the IAB Credit Union because the people who formed it were all members of the Iowa Association of the Blind. But, it was not the Iowa Association of the Blind organization that formed the credit union. There were these ten guys, and I suppose they were looking for a name. And, they thought, well, we might as well call it the IAB, which could mean Iowa Blind or whatever; but it was a separate corporation. It had nothing to do with the organization.

Well, then as time went on the IAB changed its name. The organization of the blind became the NFBI, National Federation of the Blind of Iowa. That organization as the IAB was the legal affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind. They were approved by the national office. So, whenever they changed from the IAB to the NFB of Iowa, I wasn't here when that happened. But, the credit union then changed its name to the NFBI Credit Union, which may have

caused some confusion, because I think some members of the NFBI believed then that it was their credit union. It wasn't. It was the, whatever, four hundred members, whatever it was, their credit union. But, on both sides the organization, because it used those initials, tended to think it was their credit union. Now, ultimately there was some, there was a split again in the organized blind movement. And, the organized blind movement did have some money deposited in the credit union. And, the question came up, once this organization split, and you had these two factions. Which one really had the money coming to them right?

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: Well, a court ultimately decided that the NFBI, the organization of the NFBI, had the right to the money in that savings account and they got it, you know. So, but the credit union went on in existence; changed its name to the Blind of Iowa Credit Union, which took it [out of the argument]. There was no question anymore about any organization, but there was some ill feeling about that.

Hicklin: I can certainly remember as a young staff person having the credit union here was just a tremendous asset. It helped many of us through some tough times. And, you could get small loans, and it was just a tremendous service.

Witte: It was a good thing, yeah. And, there was some questions, some criticism in the fact that it was housed in the Commission for the Blind building. The question was raised as to whether or not the credit union was paying the state of Iowa anything for that space. And, the answer was

that it wasn't, but that since the credit union existed primarily for the benefit of the blind persons, it certainly was all right to provide that service. And, little research disclosed that there were a lot of small credit unions in the state of Iowa that were housed by some parent. If Mercy Hospital had a credit union, they might provide office space. Who cares! You know, it was there for the benefit of the people who worked there. So, that didn't cause…But, the question was raised as to whether it should be housed in the Commission.

Hicklin: Wasn't there eventually some kind of a 28E agreement or something that legalized that?

Witte: I believe so. I believe there was an agreement; and I don't know. I don't recall if I ever saw that or not, but I'm sure there was, because there was an understanding among other things that the credit union could use the space here, use an office in the building that was also used for something else. But, the credit union could have…It was small enough that it had two file cabinets. So, it could have its two file cabinets and that's all the property it owned.

15:00

Witte: And, it could use the telephone and the adding machine you know, on that person's desk if…And, the agreement was that that person who was always there could take payments or whatever; transact some business. And, there wasn't that much, but you know, there was always some. And, as long as she agreed not to be absent during the lunch hour, that she worked her complete day

plus didn't take a lunch hour. And, that more than covered whatever time she might have spent. That was still an agreement then.

Hicklin: Over the years that was Sylvia Pierson wasn't it?

Witte: Yeah, for many years.

Hicklin: Really nice lady.

Witte: Yeah, she was very good. And, it was very easy for her to do whatever little transactions there were. Yeah, the story of the credit union was again indicative of a couple things. Repeating myself; one of them is that it dealt with a couple of discriminations that were there. And, that basically when the need for it was gone, well it was gone, I mean, because it never got big enough to provide things like checking accounts and whatever else. But, by being taken in to the larger state Employees' Credit Union and they were glad to have us. They had the vote to take us, and we had a vote to ask them to take us to merge. Then our members became members of the state Employees' Credit Union, and with all the rights and whatever. And, they could take their insurance with them. Now, the state Employees' Credit Union didn't offer that insurance deal because the big credit unions couldn't do it, but those of us who had that insurance benefit kept it. And, the state Employees agreed to that. They would pay the premium on those accounts. It was a good, turned out to be a pretty good deal, I think, all the way around probably.

(End of Recording 4)

17:25

(Beginning of Recording 5)

Hicklin: Do you have any memories of the details of the Commission fire and the, all the cleanup that had to take place, and how the Orientation Center survived? It obviously had to relocate to keep training going. Students had to live somewhere else. Anyway, could you provide any clarity of thought on those days of all the stuff that…

Witte: At the time of the fire students weren't living in the building, you know. They were living in an apartment. Women would live in an apartment up near Drake, and guys lived at the YMCA. So, in effect, they would come up in the morning and go home at night, go back at night. And, the fire marshal had kind of stipulated that we couldn't go above the first floor. There was some… Well, it was never any clear about that, but anyway. My understanding was that they probably weren't supposed to go above the first floor, and, in effect, students didn't.

Some of the Commission was up on second floor because Field Op., where the Home Ec. department is now, was an area of offices and that's where Field Op. went. That's where John Taylor and some of the Counselors and the secretaries were back in that area, because there was no place for them on first floor. On first floor you had the Recreation Room, and you had the Director's conference room, and you had the cafeteria; not well, what is now the cafeteria, but that was a little counter with a eating place. Beyond that you had the gymnasium. So, that was about all that was. And, the Director's conference room area.

So, the fire occurred, you know, there was some laughter and some funny things about it. We were up there busy trying to…The fire men had stretched a canvas thing all the way from the 6th floor down curving around the stairs and coming out the front door. So, you had this steady stream of water you know, coming down. And, we were up there in various places trying to move the water to the stair well. We got…some of the students came up from the Y and some of the staff, we were here. And, we worked that night trying…And, I can remember I called a friend of mine who came down and was helping me. And, on the second floor, let's see, it was hard to get to the water over, which was above the recreation room. That was the old dining room area. Anyway, it was hard to get the water from there to the stairwell, so we were bucketing it. And, there was a place there where you could just pour it over the railing, you know, from second floor to the first floor. And, this friend of mine was coming up the stairs from first floor, you know, walking beside this and John Taylor was working up on second floor filling buckets of water. And, of course, he'd take it over there, and he'd dump it over the railing, you know, and he caught my friend, John, coming up the stairs. And, John got doused with water and he hollered up, "G D what's the matter with you? You blind or something?" (Laughter) And, of course, Taylor said, "You bet I am!" So, but anyway; but it obviously was a pretty serious thing. But, then the next day basically we were back down here and it was kind of business as usual, under the difficult…

But, the Orientation Center essentially in those days was in the Recreation Room, everything was there; I was in where Hauge is now. And, Manuel Urena was over in the log cabin, and we had a typing room and we had a Braille room;

still had a stairway that went down to the basement. And, then you had the whole Recreation Room. So, we had long tables set up, some tables in the Recreation Room. And, the guys would study Braille, would be out there, you know, and, of course, the ceiling had those acoustical tiles. And, periodically as time went on, you know, they'd loosen by the water, because water was coming through the light fixtures. Every once in a while there would be a plop, and part of the ceiling would come down. And so, you might be sitting there at the table studying Braille, and all of a sudden, plop, you get some tile. And, then Home Ec. had been more or less put down in the basement anyway, in the steam room area. We had to set up a stove down there and refrigerator, I guess. And, the shop guys had made a, oh you know, it was kind of a work area thing, but had cupboards in it about table high and whatever. So, that was down there; and the kitchen. And, we'd gotten some sinks, some of those square, you know, they're laundry tubs, square tubs from Alvin Kirsner. Mrs. Kirsner was on the board, and her husband ran the Johnson Tub Factory, or something. And so, we got some tubs to use for sinks, because there was water supply down there and whatever.

So, that was pretty much...And, of course, we could work out of the building for travel purposes, but we were all there. And, in some respects it was some of our better, you know, the tragedy was the building, but that was going to work out all right; but it was kind of fun. In some ways, you know, we were putting up with stuff falling from the ceiling and, you know, using those tubs for the sinks down in the basement.

Hicklin: How large would the student body have been at that time? Are we talking, like, ten people?

Witte: Yeah, ten or twelve, probably something like that. And, see Manuel Urena would have been here and, let's see, I'm trying to think of who was there. Somebody was teaching typing; I can't think of that lady's name. Manuel was teaching Braille most of the time, and there was somebody else teaching Braille; I think Mable Nading, maybe was by that time, and the shop. See, Hal Cross was the shop teacher, and they had to have something going down there in the shop. I can't remember they had a minimal amount of tools, I think.

Hicklin: Did the shop actually start out where it is now?

Witte: Yeah, that's where those bowling alleys were and some pool tables. And, the Rec. Room had had some ping pong tables. And, I don't know if there was any ping pong tables up there or not. But, it was so you certainly weren't working under the best conditions, but in some ways it was fun having to put up with that, you know, nonsense, and keep on going; just keep on trucking.

Then we would do the other things, like you know, we haven't talked about this much either, but the Orientation Center essentially emphasized a whole lot getting out into the community and doing things. Anyway, I think I said once before that the reason the bowling alleys went was that damn it, if you're going to go bowling as a blind guy, you ought to go to a bowling alley. And, there was one right next door on the second floor of this building, North or West of us. And, you know, so we weren't going to keep those

bowling alleys if they would have been in A1 shape. So, in wood cutting, I mean, those things were going on. And, the activities, we'd go out to lunch together. There were some restaurants a block or two away. Jernigan used to go with us some times. And, there was a place called Trocadero at Third and Grand. It was kind of a bar restaurant combination. And, they had these shuffle board things you know, and we used to play the shuffle board things. And so, we had a good time and did a lot of work, and guys were learning skills. And so, in some respects, when I look back at that, those first years were, year or two, were among the best.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: The circumstances being what they were we were in this thing together, really in this thing together, so it was good. Let's see, there was something else you had there.

Hicklin: Do you remember any of the circumstances or details regarding the first student built kitchen in Home Ec.; how that all came about? That would have had to have been in, like 1960, somewhere in there.

Witte: In the '60s, somewhere in there, yeah. As I recall there were going to be. Was that the time we wound up having four kitchens?

Hicklin: No there was just two kitchens that were built.

Witte: Well, one of the kitchens was built by the shop students.

Hicklin: Yes, that later became the Home Ec. bedroom area, and then the contractor kitchen was the North kitchen at the front end of Home Ec.

Witte: The one that I really remember is when we wound up with four kitchens. Did we wind up with four? We have four now.

Hicklin: Yeah, in the last remodeling.

Witte: One of those was done completely by the students.

Hicklin: Yeah, but on this initial Home Ec., I guess, the story was the students built one of those kitchens.

Witte: One of those two.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: You know, I just don't remember that.

Hicklin: Okay.

Witte: The other one, I mean, the other one. Was Hauge here when that other one was built?

Hicklin: It was Hauge, yeah, and a bunch of the students; and that still exists.

Witte: The same plans and everything that the other kitchens had?

Hicklin: In the earlier kitchen Monty Rathbone was rumored to be one of the students that helped build that. And, perhaps Jim Gashel was here at the time. I've heard folks talk some about that, but really have never been able to unearth to any details; other than that it was a student-built kitchen and…

Witte: Yeah, I just don't remember that.

Hicklin: One of the stories was, when some of the last cabinets were being pushed back in place, there was a silver dollar dropped to be encapsulated back behind the cabinet in honor of the students' hard work that had gone into creating all this. And, years later when we remodeled Home Ec. we tried to…We did our own demolition in that section just to try to get that silver dollar back to hang onto it as a memento, and were not able to find it. So, there's always been a mystery as to what happened, but.

Witte: I just, I don't know who could tell you. I wonder if Monty's wife would know.

Hicklin: Yeah, Lucy?

Witte: Lucy Bagley. She's a widow now, I think.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: Or Gashel. Gashel's out in Denver, but you know, I just don't remember that. The only one I remember is the one that's down there now, or was, that Hauge's outfit built.

Hicklin: Do you remember any interesting stories or traditions that got spun up out of Orientation camping trips, wood cutting, skiing, whether water skiing or snow skiing; any fun stories that revolve around any of that?

(End of Recording 5)
14:58

(Beginning of Recording 6)

Witte: In regard to wood cutting, Jernigan was a great believer in the wood cutting expeditions, and he'd quote some famous author. Said that, "Cutting wood warms you twice, once when you cut it and once when you burn it." But, it was the experience of chopping and handling a saw that he was after. And, he'd had a fireplace in his house, and he liked fires in the fireplace. And, we had this great fireplace in the Recreation Room. So, two things involved; there was, we had this fireplace and we should be able to get our own fire wood, and it would be a great learning experience for students to get out there on two-man saws and learn how to do it. First of all, load up a truck full of wood and come back. So, the question came up, well, where are you going to go to cut wood? And, who's going to agree to that? So, there was a guy named Benchoff, who was actually, he was…he had a farm down near Norwalk with quite a few trees on it. And, Howard Benchoff was the, actually he was the Federal Representative of Federal Rehab., I think, in the Kansas City office. Would that be right?

Hicklin: Yeah.

Witte: That, at that time, it was the regional office? So, he was the big Rehab. guy; he and Jernigan; because the Commission works with the Federal Rehab. office right, I guess.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: So, he and Jernigan had become pretty good friends. And, he was a great respecter; they respected each other quite a bit. So, Jernigan mentioned to him one time about wood cutting. "Oh," he said, "I got a lot of trees." So, he said to me come down some time and he'd show me. So, I went down and he showed me where the trees were, and then it was quite a while before we went.

We went out on a snowy day. It was snowing, I remember. And, we rented a truck from Hertz or somebody like that, and we had a few two-man saws, not too many, and a couple axes. And so, I forgot exactly where the trees were. So, anyway, we pulled into Benchoff's, and he didn't live there. He was there part of the time but he was in Kansas City; and he certainly wasn't home that day. Anyway, we pulled in there, and I'm looking around for trees. And, I see some trees north of his house, and I said, "That must be it." So, we had to crawl through some barb wire fence, and nobody was prepared for the snow. And, you know, I remember Ruth Schroeder was wearing a fur coat and she had some boots, but crawled through the barb wire fence and got up there.

And, the trees weren't easy to get at, but anyway, we cut down two or three trees, and sawed them up. And, then

we had to lug the wood back through the fence, you know, where the truck was. And, I didn't think it was a very successful trip. When we got home discovered that we'd been on the neighbor's house, (Laughter) and Benchoff called up Jernigan and said, "My neighbor wanted to know who the hell was these people who were out there cutting down his trees." (Laughter) So, Jernigan called me in and said, "You went to the wrong place." Well, then we got on the right track. But, the next time we went again Benchoff wasn't home, but we got in to the right trees. And, we had more…I think we had bought some of those long two-man saws, you know. And, whoever was shop teacher had built some…

Hicklin: Sawbucks?

Witte: Sawbucks. So, we had a couple sawbucks and a couple axes. And so, we'd fall a tree and pick it up and then the guys would…you'd cut up part of it on the ground. And so, just learning how to saw with those two-man saws was, you know, no easy thing; it was work. And so, anyway, the only mistake we made that day I heard about that, too, was that we cut down a walnut tree. And, it was a pretty good size walnut tree; and I suppose in another 20 years it would have been worth a bunch of money. But anyway, Benchoff said… (Laughter) Called Jernigan on that one and said, the next night he said, "I'm glad that you guys are doing this," he said, "It's a good thing. The next time I want you to come down, have somebody come down, and we'll go out and we'll mark the trees." (Laughter) So, we did; we did that after that. We'd tie a yellow ribbon around it or something, and cut [the right trees].

But, it was, you know, it was a hard day's work. And, we got to the point where we'd take food out there and have a fire. And, I remember, particularly, it was simply, it was good of Bob. Home Ec. would cook meals for us, and we'd have hot coffee and food, and be dressed warm enough, and work on; and everybody had to work. Everybody had to saw, so it was a good experience, all of those things, you know, whether it was that. And, that was pushing it, I think. Some people must have thought it was pushing it, because hardly anybody cuts down their own fire wood, you know. Who has the experience to do that? How many times are you going to get a two-man saw? But, those were very worthwhile experiences. They were hard while we were doing it, but we'd also have a lot of fun, you know.

Hicklin: Certainly.

Witte: Joshing each other and…

Hicklin: And, a lot of folks that hadn't ever experienced a hard day's work experienced that.

Witte: Yeah, right. So, you came home tired at the end of the day, and then you had to unload the damn truck, you know. And, we'd actually built a little shed back there, you know; maintenance built a little shed.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: We stored the fire wood. And then, of course, to bring it in you had to go out there and get it and bring it through the shop, or bring it up and put it in the fireplace.

(Laughter) But, that was one of the most worthwhile things. We did that a couple times a year, probably maybe three times a year. Finally we went…Conservation or Natural Resource or somebody had some control of some trees east of here somewhere. And, they'd mark them for us and we could go there and cut down for wood, and everybody would go all the teachers and all of the students.

Hicklin: Right.

Witte: There was always something that you could do so that…And, you know, It was interesting that quite frequently in the beginning, Jernigan would go along and he would saw, you know.

And I remember the first time we went water skiing. I think, maybe I told you that he was there, and that was the first…It was a bunch of blind guys. We went up to Charles City. There were two members of the Lions Club in Charles City who were both, they were dentists, brothers. And so, somehow or another he had talked to them about water skiing; and we went. It was cold I remember he had some of those wet suits, but he got in. He had never water skied, you know. He got in and he kept…He had a hard time that day. He kept plugging away at it, so he, you know, that had a pretty positive affect on the students.

Hicklin: Certainly.

Witte: He wouldn't ask them to do something that he couldn't do. Same way with the wood cutting, you know. He'd love to get on the saw with somebody else, and would train students along the way, and talk while they were doing

that. So, there was actually there was always some good spirit. You would be afraid not to be in good spirits. Bowling, whatever it was, camping; all those things were what's the expression, "A class, is a class, is a class."

And, sometimes wood cutting was the best class, more important than all the Braille and typing and travel that you did. It was…Maybe to get out there and learn how to cut down a tree, to fell a tree, was, you know, it was fun and good experience.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: You know. And, I don't remember anything particularly except for that first wood cutting expedition. But, they were all, whether it was camping or putting up tents. And, of course, many of the camping trips we went on Hauge was there and he was good at putting up tents. But you know, we'd put up maybe four tents, and everybody would work on stretching out the tents and driving the pegs in and tightening up the ropes. So, good experience. Then, finding your way to a tree to use at night, you know; that was part of the deal. (Laughter)

Hicklin: One more travel skill.

Witte: Yeah. Those were all good things to do.

(End of Recording 6)
10:17

(Beginning of Recording 7)

Witte: Going out and getting a Christmas tree; every year we did that. And, we'd load everybody up in the bus, you know, and we'd go out either to some tree farm and we'd probably, or visit some tree lots in town. And, we'd get out, and we'd all get off the bus, you know, and then we'd look at trees. And, then we'd argue about which one to get, and which would be best. And so, half of the students would be shaking and shivering and saying, "Who the hell cares." And, then we might go to two or three Christmas lots, and then we'd finally decide, well, it's better to go some place where you had to cut it down, you know. So, we'd quit buying at the lots, and we'd go every year to some Christmas tree [farm] and we'd pick out one. And, then we'd have a couple saws, and then the students would take turns working on it and saw down the Christmas tree. And, we always had a pickup or something along to haul the Christmas tree home; always got a big Christmas tree. Put it in the Recreation Room and decorate it, you know. And so, we'd spend all day, maybe all morning, getting the tree, and then come back and have some…Home Ec. would do something, you know, hot chocolate or some cider or something. And, we get out the trees and trim lights and things, and decorate the Christmas tree, you know, it was like a family sort of a thing.

Again, I guess it was the whole…It was really a togetherness that we were all involved in this thing together. And so, then we'd have a Christmas party, and I can't remember that we…I don't think there was a gift exchange; I'm not sure about that. But, we'd have a party, and we'd have, you know, refreshments, and yeah, for years and years I read that story called, How the Willipus Wallipus came to Sour Apple Cove," which is an unusual Christmas

story. We'd read that, and then we'd gather around the piano and we'd sing Christmas carols. And so, it was just kind of a gay [happy] time.

Hicklin: Tremendous positive memories of that, yes.

Witte: And, Jernigan always came to those, you know. The rest of the Orientation staff and students would be there. So, all of those things really added up to a...being a...You were really a part of something that you didn't really expect to be a part of; the fact that the Orientation Center began having that annual banquet. It's the only Orientation Center in the country, I imagine, that does that to this day. But, for the first x number of years that was, you know, a big deal; still is, but not as extensive as it once was. But, people would come back that you hadn't seen all year, maybe longer than that.

And, they would come back for the alumni banquet. I've never heard of another Orientation Center that had an alumni banquet. We even had an alumni organization for a while, elected officers and all. They finally got past that. But, that was all part of, you know, the Christmas party, getting the Christmas tree and having the alumni banquet. We had Halloween parties, you know, where you'd dunk for apples and things; and any occasion for a gathering.

Hicklin: Yes.

Witte: It was part of the program, really.

Hicklin: How did we come about starting to take trips? We purchased our own Commission bus that, I think, we called

Moby Dick. And made…A few times a year we'd travel out of state to see other agencies for the blind. How did that all start, come about?

Witte: Yeah, okay. Let's go back to Moby Dick. The first bus we had was a little…It was like a 20 passenger Ford small bus. Anyway, some lady in the Jewish Temple Sisterhood gave us whatever. I think we got that bus for like $600 or something. It was a little six cylinder straight shift, old white, painted white. So, that's why we called it Moby Dick. And, it was just, you know, she offered to give it to us, and so we took it. And, then it was the question what do you do with it. Well, the first thing that we did with it was, ultimately we drove it to Washington D.C. you know, for the NFB convention in 1945 [1965], which was a, you know was…Talk about being together on something! That damn little bus! But, anyway we did that. And, I don't know whether Moby died early. Well, Moby was pretty old, so then they needed a bigger bus really.

And, then they…so the state…Then we wound up with a state bus, because the trips that we did take with the old Moby were good. And, we had, you know…That one, we'd turn a couple of seats around, put tables between so you could sit there and read or you could play cards or whatever. So, then just going on, taking it out on camping trips. You could haul all the stuff you wanted to tents, and cooking food, and everything like that. The notion of going to other Orientation Centers, for the life of me, I can't remember why we did that. But, once we started it became traditional, and discovered that it was a heck of a learning experience.

So, you know, you could talk all you wanted to here about this program and the changing of attitudes; how bad

things could be in other places. That's a little hard to believe, but if you'd get on the bus and you'd drive down to Topeka, Kansas, and at that time Topeka center, in many ways, looked pretty good. I mean, it was a nice facility on the surface. It looked like they had...I mean, like they had some of the same classes. They had Home Ec., and Braille, and typing and travel. But, when you got into the real operation of the thing, you could see a real difference. Among other things, for instance, in Kansas they had the buddy system. You had two to a room, and they talked very openly about that you know, that it was a matter of safety. What if this diabetic had a, whatever, you know. And, they had justification for everything they did. It just was so different. You couldn't keep your own medicine. So, we'd make a note of that, that you remember this teacher said or this guy said that, "No, we have a nurse that goes around and gives everybody their medication." Their travel was one-on-one; one instructor per student. And, the instructor was always there.

Let's see, they had the dining room in the Center. The Center was also located on the same grounds as the sheltered workshop, which is in a building next door. I'm trying to think of whatever else there was. They really didn't have any...They didn't have what's called a Business class at all. They had a Counselor that would counsel people individually, but there was nothing, like say, a Business class. So, okay...So, you go there and you'd...there were always good hopes. And, you know, that we could talk to their students, and their students could talk to our...

And, well, another thing is this was the only place that called a student a "student," right? Every place else you were a "client," or in some places you were a "patient,"

which was even worse. But so, it was the terminology had something to do with it. We were a student because a student is, you know, a fairly reasonable word. That's where you could have the relationship between teacher-student, witch is better than between a professional and a client right? Nothing wrong with that, but when you were a Rehab. Counselor, you dealt with clients, right? When you were in the Orientation Center, you dealt with students. That was a different relationship and it was better. So, you do that, and then you'd come back after the trip and the first thing you'd do the next day was, we'd meet up in the Business class, and they'd say, "Well, what did you guys think?" And, go over those things and say, you know, "Why do they do that?" "Why do you suppose they do that?" And, "Which is better?"

(End of Recording 7)
10:23

(Beginning of Recording 8)

Witte: So, then the more of those we could do, the better really, because the students really learned something from that. They could see first hand that they were glad that they could understand why there weren't two to a room here, or they could understand, even though they hated going out to eat supper at night; but they were better off to do that. And, this business of not being able to take their own medicine, you know. They were being treated like helpless children, almost. So, there was that, you know. It was always a good place to visit, Topeka. And, then there was Little Rock, Arkansas. We ran into some of the same things, pretty much again. The approach was just different.

I always used to call it a new custodialism. When the Orientation Centers were relatively new things, I mean. There weren't any Orientation Centers before the 1950s, except the veterans. So, when the Orientation Centers began to spread from state to state as they all did, I'd say they took the new custodial approach. They didn't go very far away from the old system. They didn't really trust…Oh, they talked about independent travel. They really weren't talking about real independent travel. One of the better ones to visit was the Veterans. The Veterans had a good; I mean they started after World War II. They did a lot of good things, I mean. They had some really good Centers, but you had the same problem there. You really weren't, you weren't trying to sell them attitude. You were teaching some good skills, but you weren't working on the attitude at all.

Hicklin: You're kind of there as a patient, their patient?

Witte: Yeah right. And, you can justify, I mean, they can justify some of their things because it was a hospital-based thing, and the guys were patients there. So, you could expect that kind of treatment. So I think that of a place, like Topeka, for instance. They may have looked at the Veteran's Hospital and copied it. So, they began to treat their people [accordingly], and that happened. Arkansas was the same way. Minnesota Services for the Blind was the same thing.

So, the more of those we could go to, the better it was. Like a trip to Chicago. You not only had the, let's see, the Center and there was also a sheltered workshop to visit. And, there was a sheltered workshop in Topeka, too. So, those were just really valuable learning experiences. And,

of course, when you're in Chicago too, you know, you've got to eat in some big restaurants, and you got to go to some big museums. And so, those were just very worthwhile things to do, again, many more things were learned there. The whole attitudinal thing was addressed much more clearly there than it was in a regular day to day routine here.

Hicklin: Another occasion to, maybe, practice your fine dining skills and be out with the public and…

Witte: Have some experience that you wouldn't ordinarily have otherwise; the run of the mill kinds of things. And so, the bus was always essential for that. And, while the bus was going to and from, you could rotate around and visit with different students and play Cribbage if you wanted to, or Bridge if you wanted to, or something like that.

Hicklin: I can remember on one of the early trips that I participated in, we were in Chicago. And, being, I guess, from small town mid-west I and several others had never ridden in a taxi cab. It was a whole new experience to take a taxi cab and go somewhere, let alone the elevated rail system and all that; just a taxi cab was a big new experience.

Witte: That's a funny thing that you'd mention the elevated thing. To this day I've never ridden on an elevated in Chicago. I don't…We should have done that when we were there on these trips, and we never did. Anyway, I'm remembering a student who was an excellent traveler here, who went to Chicago to go to school, law school. And, he called me from there and said, "Do you have any experience

with these elevated trains?" And I said, "No, I've never ridden on them. I know they're there." Well, he said, "I have to take a bus and then I have to get on the elevated train and get off and walk somewhere right to the school," and he said, "I just don't know how to do it." And I said, "Well, you know, you're there; I'm here I can't tell you." So I said, "The next time you get off the bus, ask somebody, "What's the best way to do the elevated train?" Just ask somebody." He said, "I should have thought of that." I said, "You reminded me of my son who was driving from here to D.C." "His car heated, and it was in Maryland some place, his car overheated. And he called me and said, "My car's overheating what should I do?" I said, "Ted, I'm a thousand miles away, why are you calling me?" Well, he said, "I thought maybe you could tell…" I said, "All I can tell you is let it cool down. How far is the next town?" "Well, it's probably about six miles." "Let it cool off and drive the six miles get to a gas station and they'll take care of you." But, he was kind of sheepish about that.

(End of Recording 8)
6:49

(Beginning of Recording 9)

Witte: An important part were the trips; just going on the trips. Sometimes I thought it would have been cheaper to have a couple of vans, you know, than that big old bus. But, the bus didn't get used that much, but if properly used it was a real asset. Camping trips were…

Hicklin: The group would certainly all be together, and it would be more of a family experience.

Witte: Yeah. We had a student…Different kind of experiences. We had a student who was from the Great Lake area in Iowa, Great Lakes, and she invited us all up there for a corn feast thing once; so we went. And, we had the tents set up, and one of the guys, I was in the tent with him. There were four or five of us in the tent, and we were sitting around the fire out there, just visiting. And, all of a sudden he started to snore. (Laughter) He was a champion snorer, so I thought that was just too much to miss. The other guys had gone to bed in the other tent, so I went over and woke them up and I said, "You got to…" (Laughter) We all got there, and we were all standing outside of the tent. It was like a plane taking off or a plane landing. And anyway, we made enough noise that it woke him up, and I explained to him. He never forgave me for that. I said, "You were putting on a great starring performance. We all had to listen to you."

(End of Recording 9)
2:01

(Beginning of Recording 10)

Witte: [We had mentioned organizations of the blind, and emphasizing of the blind or for the blind.] So, there had been some unfortunate breakups in the organizations of the blind. But, the more I think about it, the more I'm aware of the fact that much of the good that occurred had its foundation in the philosophy that was developed by tenBroek and

Jernigan and the NFB. And, that basically, as far as I can see, any progress that continues to be made in the field of work with the blind comes mostly from the efforts of the organizations. I think that things are going to continue to improve. I mean, if the cause is still there, the cause of the blind is still there, and improvements have to be made, chances are its going to come from one or the other organization acting together to do something. Otherwise, you know, the issues aren't going to be met.

So, I think that one of the things that probably is not happening as much as it used to be happening is that the organizations, neither one of them, as far as I can tell, tend to be growing very much. And, if they don't continue to grow then [I think], you know, kind of level off. And, things are better now, you know, for blind guys. There's no doubt about that. A lot of progress has been made, but it probably isn't going to continue. I mean, what happens to the new guys that become blind today or tomorrow? What happens to them? Maybe the Centers they go to are some better, or the programs they go to are some better, but not all of them are. And so, who's there to look upon it as a cause?

One of the things about working for the Commission [Department] for the Blind, I think, [is the importance of recognizing the "Cause"] the notion of a "Cause" is not there so much. And, the history of the Commission for the Blind is good to the extent that the "Cause" was foremost, and the "Cause" was the thing that made it really go. It wasn't the people so much as it was the people believing in the "Cause"; and particularly the blind guys believed in the "Cause." And, we look at the leadership of the organized blind movement, particularly the NFB, and a lot of them were early students from the Orientation Center. Gashel and all

those guys, they came out of here. They became believers in the "Cause." So, I think that doesn't happen so much anymore, and I think that's too bad. The philosophy is pretty hard to accept.

Still I think, you know, to the newly blinded person, its going to be, it's got to be hard. So, he's got to have contact and I'm sure that it's happening here. So, you can bring a student in here, a client in here to talk to Sandy. That guy is going to get his first contact really, probably, with the philosophy of blindness that might mean something, though. The more that can be pushed, I think, the better. Otherwise, it, as with any organizations that went great guns, its going to taper off and…

Hicklin: And, the problem with that is that conditions then, often times, revert backwards instead of forwards.

Witte: Yeah. See, a lot of the progress that was made, I think, the ending of the schools for the blind was a good thing. But, some of the progress that could have been made by going to your home town school didn't really develop, because the area teachers or whatever, the special teachers, were not, I mean, how many of them recognize that you should teach Braille? A lot of them are still saying…They go the old sight saver routine. And, they write Independent, what's the program…IEP, Individual Educational Program or something, without expectation. Some of the schools for the blind did a great job academically; and so that, you know, going to your home town school in many cases is not the solution to the problems.

Hicklin: I've heard older blind folks talk about the fact that being at Vinton you were, you had the advantage. You were around a lot of other blind guys and gals, and there was a community to that. And, that one thing with students being educated in the regular schools, they're more isolated, perhaps. I'm not sure if that's a valid point, but its one bit of thinking that's out there with some of the older folks.

Witte: Yeah. See, and I think it's a valid point. I think if the schools for the blind had developed positive philosophy of blindness, I think if the School for the Blind had been under the Commission's control in those early years, it would have done a better job, because there is still that among a lot of those guys.

You look at the Slaytons, you know, who graduated from Vinton, I mean. The attachment to Vinton is still there, as it should be, you know. They think of people they went to school with, long time friends, and, you know, that's an important thing. And, they stay in contact with them. Jo Slayton and I used to talk about the fact that the tie between the alumni of the Orientation Center was not nearly as strong as the tie between the alumni in Vinton. And, she was a graduate of Vinton and she said, "Well, certainly." And she said, "We were there for twelve years, you know." "We were there except for three months of the year we were home." And so, "Yeah," she said, "We were glad to get back and we were okay there." That's probably something we can't do much about.

Hicklin: Likely not. Well, so any other thoughts?

Witte: No.

Hicklin: Certainly thank you, Jim, for your time and your efforts here.

Witte: Well, we'll see what comes out of this thing.

(End of Recording 10)
7:48

(End of Interview)

Beverly Tietz
6-15-2011